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ANALYSIS

15 years after Godhra, we still don't know who lit the fire

What is perhaps closest to the truth is the report by the Forensic Studies Laboratory at Gandhinagar, Gujarat, which concluded that the coach was set afire by someone “standing in the passage of the compartment near seat number 72, using a container with a wide opening about 60 litres of inflammable liquid has been poured and then a fire has been started in the bogie”

 By Mohan Guruswamy

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Flower petals scattered by the relatives of Godhra riots victims pictured at the doorsteps of a train carriage, that was set on fire in 2002, during the commemoration of the 12th anniversary of Godhra riots at Godhra, Gujarat(Reuters)

Today, February 27, it will be 15 years since the  ent that lit the flames of a massive sectarian conflagration

conflagration.

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According to official sources 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were killed, and as many as 100,000 Muslims and 40,000 Hindus were rendered homeless. About 130 are still reported missing. But we know that official estimates are always low and in this case the estimates are from the Gujarat government.

Civil rights and Muslim groups report that more than 2,000 Muslims were killed by Hindu mobs. Muslim mobs too were active and exacted retribution wherever possible. But it is clearly evident that the Gujarat Police acted more firmly on Muslim mobs as 24 Muslims and 13 Hindus were killed in police firings.

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The conflagration began with a fire in coach S6 of the Sabarmati Express on February 27, 2002 killing 59 persons. But the question of who lit this fire has never been satisfactorily answered. Several people have been accused of it, and some even convicted. Like many such cases in India it is also widely believed that the innocent have been convicted and the real perpetrators are still free. We have at least one official inquiry headed by a former Supreme Court judge confirming this.

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But what is perhaps closest to the truth is the truly damning report of Mohinder Singh Dahiya, then assistant director of the Forensic Studies Laboratory (FSL) at Gandhinagar, Gujarat, which put paid to the theory of the coach being set afire by an angry mob, which had mysteriously collected outside the Godhra railway station. The report concluded that the coach was set afire by someone “standing in the passage of the compartment near seat number 72, using a container with a wide opening about 60 litres of inflammable liquid has been poured and then a fire has been started in the bogie.” Dahiya is a highly-qualified professional with a doctorate in forensic science and is currently the Director of the institute of forensic science and institute of behavioral science at the Gujarat Forensic Sciences University, set up by the Gujarat government.

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Smoke pours from the carriage of a train on fire in Godhra, in Gujarat, February 27, 2002. (Reuters)

The FSL had also demonstrated by experiments that it was virtually impossible to throw inflammable liquids into the train through the open windows that are at a height of seven feet from the ground. The report also states that there was a three feet high mound running parallel to the track at a distance of 14 feet and if the fire bombers were standing on this mound and sloshing the fuel at the compartment only about 10-15% of the fuel would have got inside. Since the rest of the fuel would then have fallen outside there would have been burn damage on and near the track. This was not so.

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File photographs of the burning coach show the flames raging from within and without even the external paintwork being touched. The pictures also show rescuers trying to hose down the flames standing right alongside the burning coach. Very obviously the coach was set afire from within.

The train was chock-a-block full of kar sevaks and whosoever was carrying “a container with a wide opening holding about 60 liters of inflammable liquid” should have been able to mingle freely with the kar sevaks. If this is so, the person carrying such a container with a wide opening did so quite openly which means he, she or they would have been known to the other passengers. Remember the country was in a state of heightened military alert after the December 13 attack on Parliament and it would just not be possible for a stranger to walk into a crowded coach of true believers with a large container of liquid.

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The train was almost a Rambhakt special and each compartment was full of people from a particular area or belonging to a particular group within the Sangh parivar, all of who would have been known to each other. It

is therefore extremely implausible that a perfect stranger or strangers would have been able to splash the petrol and set it alight and then escape. The killer/killers would have had to have been in the adjoining compartment or be able to alight quickly from the burning compartment without arousing suspicion. Furthermore, the train was stopped by pulling the emergency chain and that can only be from inside.



A policeman walks towards the entrance of a carriage of a train in Godhra, Gujarat, February 27, 2002.

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Consequently the theory that it was an ISI cell or a group who boarded the train after it was stopped that had carried out the carnage becomes extremely difficult to sustain.

It would now seem that the harassment and intimidation of the mostly Muslim hawkers at Godhra railway station was deliberate and aimed at provoking an agitated response. But petty harassment in itself would not have provoked such a disproportionate reaction as torching a train. It would seem that someone wished to take advantage of this reaction and if this was so, the torching of coach S6 could have been intended to provoke a furious backlash. This seems like a classic agent provocateur operation that went out of hand.

The use of agent provocateurs to create a crisis is not uncommon. We see much of it all around. Sometimes it is a pig's head thrown in a mosque, or a cow's head thrown into a temple. Cadre-based political parties for whom the end justifies all means are especially adept at this.

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It's not only cadre-based political parties that do this. Countries with active intelligence services routinely do this. Intelligence agencies like the CIA, British SIS, French SDECE, Israeli Mossad, Russian FSB, Chinese GRI, Pakistani ISI and even the Indian R&AW carry out such operations routinely. Even now Pakistan insists that the January 30, 1971 hijacking of "Ganga", an Indian Airlines Fokker Friendship aircraft, to Lahore by Hashim and Ashraf Qureshi, was a R&AW operation meant to precipitate the termination of over flights to Dhaka making the link between the two Pakistani halves even more tenuous.

In 1991, a unit of the Peoples War Group attacked the Kakatiya Fast Passenger train at Charlapalli near Hyderabad killing 47 passengers in the blaze set off by them. It took only a small quantity of incendiary material to set off the blaze as the coaches are constructed with mostly incendiary materials. One of the attackers was apprehended. Later the PWG issued a statement that the death of 47 passengers was inadvertent and expressed regret for it.

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In another incident at 4.30 am on March 8, 1993, in Guntur district, in Andhra Pradesh, two Dalit youth

Satuluri Chalapathi Rao (24) and Gantela Vijayvardhana Rao (22) inspired by the plot a popular Telugu movie held up an APRTC express bus from Hyderabad to Chilkaluripet under the threat of torching it. They wanted money to start a business. Things didn't happen as they did in the movie. The passengers panicked and in the ensuing melee the can of petrol dropped in the bus, which in turn had a leaky fuel tank, resulting in an explosive fire — 22 passengers were killed. In both cases while there was intent to commit another crime, what resulted was not intended.



Survivors look at the pictures of the Godhra riots victims at a photo-exhibition held to commemorate its 10th anniversary in Ahmedabad, February 27, 2012. (REUTERS)

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It is difficult to imagine that a container with a wide mouth carrying at least 60 litres of petrol was meant to cause just an innocuous incident on the Sabarmati Express. Clearly there are many questions to be answered, particularly in light of the subsequent events.

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The views expressed are personal

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